

AGE DISCRIMINATION – *the last great workplace taboo...*

According to Wikipedia Ageism is stereotyping and prejudice against individuals or groups because of their age. The term was first coined in 1969 by US gerontologist Robert N. Butler to describe discrimination against seniors.

There is a perception that age discrimination is not viewed as strongly or as seriously as race and gender discrimination. Yet age discrimination is the last of the great taboos in the workplace today. It is not given equal footing along with race and gender discrimination. And as a taboo it is seldom discussed let alone an agenda topic at conferences. We don't overtly use it as a selection criterion but subtly it lurks beneath the radar.

Some thoughts from abroad

"Age discrimination in hiring has been shown to exist in the United States. Joanna Lahey, Economics professor at Texas A&M University, found that firms are more than 40% more likely to interview a younger job applicant than an older job applicant. In a survey for the University of Kent, England, 29% of respondents stated that they had suffered from age discrimination. This is a higher proportion than for gender or race discrimination. Dominic Abrams, Social Psychology professor at the University, concluded that ageism is the most pervasive form of prejudice experienced in the UK population today" Wikipedia. Yet both of these countries have employment law which offers protection against age discrimination. The EU countries also have legislation which offers protection against age discrimination.

Some thoughts from South Africa

Specifically in South Africa our employment law in the form of the various applicable pieces of legislation effectively covers all types of discrimination on paper. Both the Labour Relations Act (LRA) and the Employment Equity Act (EEA) protects all employees against age discrimination, and indeed any form of discrimination which is arbitrary. Yet numerous job hunters say that landing a new job after age 45 becomes harder.

Given the above is it our own inherent prejudices against age that needs to change?

"You know you are old when the candles cost more than the cake" Bob Hope

The over 50's, even the age group 45-50 find themselves outside of the job market. Yet this is at a time when most if not all industries within South Africa is facing a shortage of skills. We constantly in recruitment circles talk about the war for talent, yet older people are neither being recruited,

promoted or retrained in this war. The wonderful advances of medical science have ensured that our life expectancy is increased, so why do we not extend this concept to longer term career expectancy? ***But that cake is not stale!*** Why wind our careers down as we approach 50, when we have so much yet to contribute, a life time of learning, training, experience and knowledge gained?

Older people have a wealth of experience to bring to the workplace. Yet in times of downsizing, mergers and acquisitions these are the ones that are the first to go, are given packages or early retirement options. How did this assumption develop that people become less productive, less professional and creative after 50? Yet so often when recruiting we exclude this section of the population. We don't put age in adverts, we don't discuss it in interviews, we don't make it a criterion in redundancies yet it is undeniably there.

Yes, businesses do need to put the right person in the job at the right time. However, we are either subconsciously or consciously putting restrictions in the way of whom we recruit, train or promote when we start considering as a factor how much more productivity a person has in terms of workplace longevity. We should put aside our preconceived ideas of people's age as we are overlooking a potentially rich pool of available labour. We have a wasted resource that we are overlooking in a critical time of a national skills shortage.

Instead we should use this as an opportunity to bring this sector of the workforce back to fill vacant opportunities and transfer much needed skills to the younger generation to narrow the skills gap. Before we so readily offer early retirement packages we should stop to consider that these employees should be retained to act as workplace coaches to transfer those much needed skills to the young and up and coming professionals.

Once again we have to look to the Aging Boomers who are a particularly influential generation to change workplace prejudices against age discrimination as they have often been catalysts for change. Their advancing age is causing an increase in the number of older employees, creating workplace dynamics that has the potential to effect some interesting changes. So given their numbers and the value of their workplace experience coupled with their strong work ethic, the baby boomers must once again beat vigorously against the current status quo.

We must break the age paradigm! Abraham Lincoln that wise old statesman once said "And in the end, it's not the years in your life that count. It's the life in your years".